

# Happiness in the World of John Steinbeck

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## Introduction

Often in his [John Steinbeck] fiction that which is outside man becomes a metaphor for that which is inside. He asks the question, "How does your garden grow?" ... Instead, he felt that to get at the inner man he need only observe each man's "garden" and how he tended it.<sup>(1)</sup>

This is an interesting view of Jackson J. Benson about the fact that John Ernst Steinbeck (1902-68) liked gardening in life. It is said that John Steinbeck had been looking for his own "Garden of Eden" throughout all his life. Therefore, taking this into consideration with Benson's view, it is conceivable that there was an implication of "the Garden of Eden" in the word "garden" in Steinbeck's question, "How does your garden grow?" That is to say, we can interpret his question to mean that he intended to ask his friends or acquaintances whether they lived a happy life.

The question now arises: what did Steinbeck think happiness consisted in? Everyone seeks happiness, but different people have different answers to this question; some might think much of the spiritual elements, others the material ones.

The purpose of this paper is to grasp what happiness in the fiction of John Steinbeck consists in. I would like to study it taking up *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *The Pearl* (1947) and *East of Eden* (1952) mainly.

## Chapter 1

Steinbeck asserts in *The Grapes of Wrath* that all members of the family should be together under any circumstances. In this chapter I will consider the subject for this paper from the viewpoint of the family.

Soon after they have left for California, the Joads meet the Wilsons and they consent

to go to the West together. When the Wilsons' car breaks down, Tom Joad suggests that Jim Casy and himself should stay to fix it and the others should go on ahead. He thinks of catching up with them as soon as he finishes fixing the car. However, Ma Joad is adamantly opposed to his suggestion; she emphasizes the importance and necessity of their being together:

"What we [the Joads] got lef' in the worl' ? Nothin' but us. Nothin' but the folks. We come out an' Grampa, he reached for the shovel—self right off. An' now, right off, you [Tom] wanna bust up the folks —" (*GW* Chap.16, pp.230 - 1)

She goes on to say:

"The money we'd make wouldn't do no good.... All we got is the family unbroke. Like a bunch a cows, when the lobos are ranging, stick all together. I ain't scared while we're all here, all that's alive, but I ain't gonna see us bust up." (*GW* Chap.16, p.231)

She knows that Tom has made the suggestion for the good of his family after careful consideration. In her opinion, however, they must absolutely avoid acting separately. Now that the Joads have lost almost everything — their jobs, house, farm, household effects, farm implements and domestic animals —, they are left with nothing but their family. They are on their way to California with the hope that they will be able to lead a happy life there again, but at the same time they feel a touch of anxiety about their future as well. There is no guarantee that they will be able to make a living; only a handbill for the job offer is their mainstay. Moreover, it is inevitable that they will continue the hard trip because of little money, the long distance to California and fierce heat. Under the circumstances, it is the existence of their family members that gives them the power to live. Ma Joad especially cherishes deep affection for her family ; accordingly she has a strong fear of their parting, and also she feels sadder about it than any other member in her family when it happens to her.<sup>(3)</sup> Unfortunately, the Joads go through many heart-rending partings en route: Grampa and Granma pass away, and Noah and Connie each part from their family of their own will. The biggest tragedy is that the family gets separated. Ma believes that her family can pull through if only they are in a body. The words of Ma Joad

are worthy of great attention because they go deep into the heart of the value of the family.

Pa Joad and Tom understand Ma's feelings and try to keep their family sticking together. For instance, Uncle John thinks that he should go away because he is possessed with the idea that he is bringing bad luck to his family. Pa says to Uncle John, "...don' you go away. We're droppin' folks all the time—Grampa an' Granma dead, Noah an' Connie—run out...." (GW Chap.22, p.435) Rose of Sharon insists on staying at a campsite in Hooverville alone in order to wait for Connie to return. Tom calms her down and persuades her to go with her family saying, "'Connie' ll find us [the Joads]. I lef' word up at the store where we'd be. He'll find us.' ... 'Don' you [Rose of Sharon] worry. He'll find us.'" (GW Chap.20 p.379) Al wants to work at a garage and live all by himself. Tom tells Al to suppress the desire to do that on behalf of his family: "'You got to stay, Al. You got to take care a the truck.' ... 'Can't help it, Al. It's your folks. You can help'em.'" (GW Chap.26 pp.533-4)

I will now leave *The Grapes of Wrath* and turn to *East of Eden*. To begin with, I would like to discuss a major turning point in life of Adam Trask.

Adam Trask grew up in grayness, and the curtains of his life were like dusty cobwebs, and his days a slow file of half-sorrows and sick dissatisfactions, and then, through Cathy, the glory came to him. (EE Chap.15, p.132)

After being discharged from the military service and coming back home to Connecticut, Adam lives an insipid and purposeless life as ever. In other words, he neither tastes the sweet joy of life nor has any particular wish.

However, meeting and getting married to Cathy completely change his life as he himself says:

"A kind of light spread out from her [Cathy]. And everything changed color. And the world opened out. And a day was good to awaken to. And there were no limits to anything. And the people of the world were good and handsome. And I was not afraid any more." (EE Chap.15, p.170)

It is not until Adam meets her that he becomes full of vigor: he comes to cherish a dream of forming and keeping a happy home and determines to spare no effort to realize it.

Consequently, he moves from his hometown to Salinas and intends to build a residence with a beautiful garden for his wife, Cathy, and his children. He is sure that he will have a brilliant future before him. This conveys to us that the existence of his beloved family gives him a hope for the future and the power to live.

After Cathy shoots Adam and runs away from home, he is in the depths of despair; it is a great shock to him that she forsakes him and her twin babies. It is not too much to say that Cathy is his life. Therefore, he becomes as good as dead: her act deprives him of his delight of life, his dream and even his will to live. To put it the other way around, the existence of the family is very significant. In short, for good or ill, speech and behavior of the family have a vital influence on one.

Next, it may be worth referring to Samuel Hamilton. The Hamiltons live in needy circumstances because their land is sterile and Samuel has no talent for making money; sometimes they cannot get food and clothing. However, Samuel is greatly blessed by his family. They all have individuality but they stand united.

All in all it [the Hamiltons] was a good firm-grounded family, permanent, and successfully planted in the Salinas Valley.... It was a well-balanced family with its conservatives and its radicals, its dreamers and its realists. Samuel was well pleased with the fruit of his loins. (*EE* Chap.5, p.44)

The Hamiltons are such a nice family that Louis Lippo, a friend of Samuel's, admires Samuel for his family. It is clear that no matter how poor one may be, he can enjoy a life of happiness as long as he has a good family.

*The Pearl* is also noteworthy when we study the family in the works of John Steinbeck. Kino, who is a fisherman, finds the greatest pearl in the world. Kino and his wife, Juana, rejoice over it, and he thinks that the pearl will enable them to marry in church, to have new clothes and a rifle and to send their son, Coyotito, to school. Because of the immense value of the pearl, however, someone tries to plunder Kino of it and Kino gets into a dangerous situation a few times.

Juana perceives at once that the pearl is ominous, or that it brings her family unhappiness rather than happiness:

"This thing [pearl] is evil," she [Juana] cried harshly. "This pearl is like a sin! It will

destroy us,” and her voice shrilly. “Throw it away, Kino. Let us break it between stones. Let us bury it and forget the place. Let us throw it back into the sea. It has brought evil. Kino, my husband, it will destroy us,” And in the firelight her lips and her eyes were alive with her fear. (*Pearl* Chap.3, p.50)

She is terribly fearful that their happiness may be destroyed, and therefore she fervently pleads Kino to throw the pearl away. For her, keeping their present happiness is much more important than being rich. On the other hand, Kino believes that the pearl will make them happier. In spite of her earnest entreaties, he is obdurate in refusal to dispose of the pearl, when she makes her mind to throw the pearl away into the sea by herself. Although it means disobedience to her husband, she tries to carry it out. What prompts her to determine to do it is nothing else but her love for her family. All these actions of Juana clearly show how much she loves her husband and baby and how keenly she desires true happiness.

After all, in self-defense Kino kills a man who has attacked him. What is worse, his canoe is broken by someone and also his house is burned down. He and his family have no choice but to take flight. On the way he suggests that he should act as a decoy and lead the trackers into the mountains. He thinks that it is the only safe way, but Juana never approves of his suggestion. This attitude of her reminds us of Ma Joad's, previously mentioned. Juana also hates to act apart and wants to overcome the difficulties together, even if there is much danger.

Greatly to the grief of Kino and Juana, Coyotito is shot to death by one of the trackers after the severe flight; Kino cannot give wealth up, in consequence, they lose their beloved son and suffer crushing sorrow.

It follows from what has been said that nothing is more precious than the family—the family that enables one to have the will to live and vital force.

## Chapter 2

Next, I would like to shift my focus to a mother in this chapter because a mother plays an important role in the family. The fiction of John Steinbeck is apparently male-centered. However, we should bear in mind that his female characters, especially mother characters, deserve careful attention.

There is no doubt that the prominent mother character is Ma Joad in *The Grapes of*

*Wrath*.

She [Ma Joad] seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledge hurt and fear.... From her position as healer, her hands had grown sure and cool and quiet; from her position as arbiter she had become as remote and faultless in judgement as a goodness. (*GW* Chap.8 p.100)

We can safely say that this description summarizes the significance of the existence of Ma Joad: she is definitely the spiritual supporter of the Joads. She has the absolute confidence of her family. Pa Joad loses his leadership and later Tom has to leave his family when she unifies and leads her family in the men's place. She is devoted to her family, so that she always tries to pave the way for their survival. In the last part of the story, Ma decides to get out of the boxcar and finds a barn on a slightly rolling hill. The Joads can take shelter from the rain in the barn. This is one of the examples to show that her correct judgement and acting power enable her family to survive under harsh conditions. John H. Timmerman states:

Ma Joad also takes over the dominant male role of the family so that her generosity and loving-kindness will prevail.<sup>(4)</sup>

Some passages telling that the mother is the pivotal person in the family are found in *The Pearl* too.

Kino drew a great breath and fought off his weakness. "No," he said. You [Juana] are right." And his will hardened and he was a man again. (*Pearl* Chap.5, p.79)

In the above scene Juana tells Kino that he has taken a man's life and accordingly they have to flee from the trackers. Once she realizes that their usual happiness has been ruined, she faces up to the reality and thinks what to do next without abandoning herself to grief; she always gropes for the best way for her family. Besides, whenever feelings of

bewilderment, weakness or resignation creep over Kino, Juana makes him take his courage in both hands. The following makes it clear that she is much more strong-willed than he and that she is the absolute:

He [Kino] looked then for weakness in her [Juana] face, for fear or irresolution, and there was none. ...he had taken strength from her. When they moved on it was no longer panic flight. (*Pearl* Chap.6, p.102)

It seems that love and a strong mind are the two sides of the same thing: love produces the matchless strong mind. The Joads are supported by the love and the indomitable spirit of Ma. She has a firm conviction: Where there is a will, there is a way.

Ma cleared her throat. "It ain' t kin we? It' s will we?" she said firmly. "As far as 'kin' , we can' t do nothin' , not go to California or nothin' ; but as far as 'will' , why, we'll do what we will." (*GW* Chap.10, p.139)

It is because they are the mothers that it is possible for Ma and Juana to be the spiritual supporter and leader. The mother who nourishes her baby in her womb and then gives birth to it is the embodiment of life. Furthermore, the pregnancy and the childbirth work internal changes in a woman. That is to say, they give her many marvelous things: great delight, perfect composure, profound wisdom, a tenacious spirit, invincible and dogged courage, and so on:

Connie...was still frightened and bewildered at the change in her [Rose of Sharon].... There was a balanced, careful, wise creature who smiled shyly but very firmly at him. Connie was proud and fearful of Rose of Sharon. (*GW* Chap.10, p.130)

Rose of Sharon is surely taking over the role of mother from Ma Joad; she shows a steady growth toward the woman who deserves to be the successor to Ma. Juana makes a similar impression on Kino:

Kino had wondered often at the iron in his patient, fragile wife [Juana]. She, who was obedient and respectful and cheerful and patient, she could arch her back in child pain with hardly a cry. She could stand fatigue and hunger almost better than

Kino himself. In the canoe she was like a strong man. (*Pearl* Chap.1, pp.8-9)

The mother has the inherent ability to fulfill her role as a woman, and the wisdom to maintain life; she makes the best use of them for her family. Motherhood helps a woman to develop her ability and wisdom:

...she [Elizabeth] said confidently, "a whole plane of knowledge opens when a woman is carrying a child." <sup>(5)</sup>

No sooner has a woman become pregnant than she begins to assume the specific characteristics of the mother as stated above. Her husband gives her a look full of wonder, respect, and sometimes awe.

Liza Hamilton in *East of Eden* is another mother character who cannot be ignored. Liza has delivered four boys and five girls, and rears all of them excellently. In addition, she is good at cooking and always keeps her house clean. She is the good wife and the good mother like Ma Joad, Juana and the young wife in "Breakfast" (1936). She takes care of her husband and children with affection while she stays, encourages and reproves them. Besides, we can see that she manages her family budget so that they can live. Liza is the person who takes upon her shoulders the whole responsibility as the protector of their lives. She never loses her survival power:

Una's death cut the earth from under Samuel's feet and opened his defended keep and let in old age. On the other hand Liza, who surely loved her family as deeply as did her husband, was not destroyed or warped. Her life continued evenly. She felt sorrow but she survived it. (*EE* Chap.24, p.292)

The following words of Ma Joad fully express the specific characteristic of woman who is emblematic of the steady stream of life:

"Woman can change better'n a man.... It [the Joads' life] ain't, Pa. An' that's one thing a woman knows.... Woman, it's all one flow, like a stream, little eddies, little waterfalls, but the river, it goes right on. Woman looks at it like that. We ain't gonna die out. People is goin' on — changin' a little, maybe, but goin' right on." (*GW*



Chap.28, p.577)

We may say that a woman who is the mother is much stronger than a man in a sense. She keeps having the will to live even if she is in the face of a difficult condition and encouraging her family. Woman links the generation with the next generation by childbirth and child rearing; hence, the mother is the personification of the vital force. It cannot be overemphasized that the mother holds the most important place in her family.

### Chapter 3

Finally, the significance of having land will be discussed.

The Joads and other tenant people are driven off their own land. They persevere under the humiliating and distressing situation and leave for California in pursuit of a better life. Now that they have lost their own land in their country, they have no economic foundation for their livelihood; there is an undesirable possibility that they cannot make a living unless they are taken into employment. Therefore, it is necessary for them to get land again in order to regain a stable and peaceful life. If only the migrant people own the land, they can live a self-sufficient life by cultivating a crop and raising domestic animals. Viewed in this light, the land is regarded as a place where the migrant people earn their daily bread so as to survive: they can work on it and support their family.

Besides, the migrant people go on moving toward California day after day. So to speak, a tent is their house in the existing circumstances but it is too uncomfortable and uneasy to live in. Rose of Sharon desires to buy a house for her baby: "We [Connie and Rose of Sharon] got to have a house 'fore the baby comes. We ain't gonna have this baby in no tent.'" (*GW* Chapter20, p.344) One wants a house that keeps off the heat of summer and the cold of winter, and also gives shelter from the rain and wind – a house as a citadel that nothing can threaten his life. Tom and Ma Joad have a conversation:

"Winter's on the way. I [Tom] jus' hope we [the Joads] can get some money 'fore it comes. Tent ain't gonna be nice in the winter."

Ma sighed, and then she straightened her head. "Tom," she said, "we gotta have a house in the winter. ... We got have a house when the rains come." (*GW* Chap.26, p.495)

We must not forget that the idea of belonging to some specific place bears great import in the works of John Steinbeck.

Grampa of the Joads is reluctant to go to California:

“Me [Grampa] – I’ m stayin’ . ... This here’ s my country. I b’ long here. ... I ain’ t a goin’ . This country ain’ t no good, but it’ s my country. ... I’ ll jus’ stay here where I b’ long.” (*GW* Chap.10, p.152)

Grampa dies just after they leave for California. The author indicates in Jim Casy’ s phrase that he has died because he has been estranged from his own land: “ ‘He [Grampa] died the minute you [the Joads] took’ im off the place.’ ” (*GW* Chap.13 p.199) Grampa and his old place are one thing. Grampa’ s death tells us how close the connection is between one and his land. It is altogether conceivable that his country is the most suitable place where one can belong.

This goes for John Steinbeck. I would like to mention briefly the connection of Steinbeck and his hometown, Salinas. His deep emotions at the time of his revisit to Salinas in his last years are revealed in his travel book, *Travels with Charley in Search of America* (1962). He had left Salinas after his break up with his first wife, Carol, and marriage with Gwyndolyn. He had been told to return to Salinas by one of his old friends: “ ‘You [Steinbeck] have to come back. You belong here [Salinas].’ ”<sup>(6)</sup> The longer one lives on the land and the more he gets from it, the stronger the connection between him and it becomes; therefore, it is not easy to find out his foundation in the new land. Jackson J. Benson points out:

California was not the same place and he [Steinbeck] was not the same man – whether he liked or not, his roots had been cut away from him. But then, once a writer goes on to a new area, how does he write, a stranger without strong connections with the land and the people? This is not just with question of material – material is everywhere – but a question of motive, involvement, perspective, and impulse.<sup>(7)</sup>

In *Of Mice and Men* (1939) George Milton and Lennie Small lead a rootless life as a bindle stiff; they keep traveling together from one ranch to another. They are not satisfied

with their present life and share the same dream – a dream of having their own house and land and living off the fat of the land: “ ‘We [George and Lennie] jus’ live there [their own place]. We’ d belong there.’ ” (*MM* Chap.3, p.56) Candy tells George and Lennie how miserable having no place to go and no job is: “ ‘When they [the employer and other people] can me [Candy] here I wisht somebody’ d shoot me. But they won’ t do nothing like that. I won’ t have no place to go an’ I can’ t get no more job.’ ” (*MM* Chap.3, p.59) The necessity of land is epitomized in the following words of Candy:

“Sure they all want it. Everybody wants a little bit of land, not much. Jus’ som’ thin’ that was his. Som’ thin’ he could live on and there couldn’ t nobody throw him off of it.” (*MM* Chap.4, p.74)

### Conclusion

It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that the existence of the family is the most essential element of happiness. Indeed other elements – his own land, a comfortable house, money and so on – are important, but they are the added elements and they alone are not enough. In the world of John Steinbeck people need their family whom they love and are loved by, help and are helped by, and share their joys and sorrows with. Let me stress again that the mother plays a very significant role for the happiness of her family. We may go on from these to the conclusion that happiness originates in a family consisting of the father, mother and children. It may safely be said that Steinbeck condenses his view of happiness in “Breakfast”. There is a working-class family that is composed of three generations: a grandfather, father, young mother and baby. They have been working for twelve days and consequently they can eat to the full and afford to buy new clothes. They welcome the narrator, although he is a stranger, and give him a good breakfast. What makes the narrator be pleased is not only their kindness but also their being happy.

### Notes

(1) Jackson J. Benson, *Looking for Steinbeck’s Ghost*.

(Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p.57.

(2) The edition used throughout is John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) and *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) and *The Pearl* (New York: A Bantam Book,

1979) and *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). Hereafter the chapter and page numbers are cited parenthetically with the abbreviation for the title of those works in the text.

*GW* : *The Grapes of Wrath*

*EE* : *East of Eden*

*Pearl* : *The Pearl*

*MM* : *Of Mice and Men*

- (3) Ma Joad often tells that it is very important and necessary for her family to be together or looks back on the past when they have been in a body and grieves over the present situation that they are breaking up. Added to the question in the text, the following are some of her references to the family:

“ ‘We [the Joads] don’ want you [Rose of Sharon] to go ’ way from us,’ she [Ma Joad] said. It ain’ t good for folks to break up.’ ” (*GW* Chap.16, p.225)

“ ‘But gin’ away ain’ t gonna ease us [the Joads]. It’ s gonna bear us down. ...an’ we was always one thing—we was no more. I [Ma Joad] can’ t get straight.’ ” (*GW* Chap.26, p.536)

“ ‘Use’ ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’ t so now.’ ” (*GW* Chap.30, p.606)

- (4) John H. Timmerman,

*John Steinbeck’s Fiction The Aesthetics of the Road Taken* .

(Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), p.122.

- (5) John Steinbeck, *To a God Unknown* .

(New York: Penguin Books, 1995), Chap.18, p.105.

- (6) John Steinbeck, *Travel with Charley in Search of America* .

(New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p.201.

- (7) Jackson J. Benson, *The True Adventures of John Steinbeck: Writer* .

(London: Heinemann, 1984), p.702.

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